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**Title:** Questions of Honour: Dalit women activists and the rumour mill in Tamil Nadu

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## Questions of Honour: Dalit women activists and the rumour mill in Tamil Nadu

*Recent caste conflicts have revolved around discourses of honour, caste pride and shame. Although Dalit movements have been at the receiving end of the violence and have condemned the casteism underpinning it, they operate within a society in which questions of honour are highly significant. Dalit women activists are trapped in an unenviable position within the twin structures of caste and patriarchy, both of which speak to debates about group boundaries and honour. Taking the recent violence as its starting point, this paper draws on interviews with and observations of Dalit women in the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (Liberation Panther Party) in Tamil Nadu to chart how discourses of honour both facilitate and constrain their capacity to act. For all the party's emphasis on women's rights, women activists face an uphill struggle to secure recognition, respect and responsiveness both within the party as well as wider society.*

### Introduction

In 2012, caste violence flared up in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu, South India, when a politically dominant caste group laid waste to three Dalit settlements<sup>1</sup>. The alleged trigger for this violence was a cross-caste marriage between a Dalit man and a Vanniyar woman. Most commentators suggest that there were wider issues at play here, but much of the rhetoric by (male) politicians and in the media concerned the status of women and the relationship between caste groups. The following excerpt from *The Hindu* captures the competing narratives surrounding the arson and destruction in Dharmapuri:

Referring to the marriage between a Vanniyar girl and a Dalit boy that sparked off the mayhem, Dr. Ramadoss argued that inter-caste marriages had become a weapon in the hands of Dalit youth to settle score with the intermediate communities. He wanted the legal age of marriage for girls to be raised to 21 years as only then “they would be mentally and physically prepared for marriage.”

Asked about the allegation that VCK was encouraging love affairs between Dalit boys and girls from other castes with devious motives, Mr Thirumavalavan wondered whether any external agency could egg on two people to fall in love.

“Love is something spontaneous,” he said. ... He insisted that the Dalits in Dharmapuri were targeted because the intermediate communities could not digest the economic empowerment of the Dalits. Besides, PMK orchestrated the violence to arrest the decline of its following among Vanniyars, Thirumavalavan said.

The Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front (TNUEF) leader P. Sampath said oppressive castes had always opposed inter-caste marriages as they were afraid that it would result in the erosion of their own power and dominance [Kolappan 2012].

The exchanges reported here encapsulate the heated debates about caste and the way in which women feature as symbols or markers in caste disputes. Dr Ramadoss is the leader of the politically strong and socially dominant, but economically deprived, Vanniyar caste party, the *Paatali Makkal Katchi* (PMK: The Toiling People's Party). For him, Vanniyar women are being lured away from their community by devious Dalits. The call for the legal age of marriage to be raised *for girls* implies that these are not matches that any rational or responsible woman would enter into. Thirumavalavan, leader of the largest Dalit movement in the state – the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (VCK - Liberation Panther Party) - by contrast, argues that love is blind and that the key issue is Vanniyar jealousy of Dalit development. This position is fully in keeping with his party's emphasis on eradicating caste and liberating women, and matches his critique of patriarchy as

articulated in speeches and writing. In this sense the VCK appears to be at one with the Communist led TNUEF in pointing to the underlying questions of power.

If we look beyond the bewildering acronyms and different political positions, the violence and its aftermath in Dharmapuri speak to the complex interplay of caste, class, and gender in contests over identity and status. Debates and conflicts around these issues often cohere around the concept of 'honour'. As with most social situations, the reality is rather more complex than the neat division between casteist PMK and progressive others would suggest. For one thing, the above excerpt gives no indication of the history of Tamil politics which celebrated cross-caste marriages, nor that the PMK and VCK were recently in a political alliance and campaigned together to protect the 'honour' of Tamil women. That the violence against cross-caste marriages in Dharmapuri was articulated as a defence of Vanniyar honour, testifies to the contingent interpretations and uses of the concept. The shifting boundaries of acceptable marriages and behaviour, as Abraham (2014: 58) argues, suggests that control of women's sexuality is 'about maintaining privilege and power, or asserting caste pride'. This is to the fore in the alarming reports about intra-Dalit 'honour crimes' (Chandran 2012).

Articulated like this, the concept of honour appears as a group attribute regulating public conduct in order to police group boundaries. Indeed, George (2006: 37) notes that 'individual honour is usually subsumed to family and religious or caste community honour'. From this perspective it is easy to understand Derne's (1995: 153) assertion that 'only public actions can cause dishonour'. Given that cross-caste alliances in the area went unnoticed until a spotlight was cast on them, a superficial reading of events in Dharmapuri would confirm such analysis. Focussing in on dramatic or unusual events, however, can give a distorted picture of everyday processes. George (2006) observes that discourses on honour lie in the interstices between private lives and public actions, and she notes how private lives are regulated in accordance with cultural norms too. In this paper I will trace the discourses of honour and caste pride that revolve around women but rarely give voice to them, and explore how they shape everyday actions and attitudes in ways that constrain Dalit women's activism. In so doing, the paper will interrogate the concepts of 'honour' and 'caste pride' as articulated in the context of contests over social standing.

This paper focuses on both male and female Dalit (formerly untouchable) activists affiliated to the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi*. The paper, as such, is primarily about politically mobilised Dalits who have experienced some material development, and cannot be generalised to all Dalit castes in the state. In much of the literature Dalits are seen as exempt from concerns around honour and the policing of caste boundaries since they lack the power to enforce compliance from others and lack the means to withdraw women from work (Irudayam, Mangubhai and Lee 2011; Geetha 2009). Abraham (2014: 63) takes issue with these arguments pointing to change over time to suggest that 'shifts in the assertion of endogamy vary according to a caste's consciousness and its aspirations at a particular historical moment'. Drawing on her research in Andhra, Still (2011: 1128) similarly argues that 'when economic circumstances allow it, Dalits adopt/and/or enforce a gender ideology similar to that of higher status groups'. This dynamic is a deeply problematic one for Dalit movements. On the one hand they see endogamy as central to caste and critique it accordingly (Ambedkar 2011; Thirumavalavan 2004), on the other the actions of assertive Dalits may serve to reinforce patriarchy (Anandhi, Jeyarajan and Krishnan 2002). The paper starts by setting the context for these debates in the southern state of Tamil Nadu and reviews some of the literature on honour, caste and gender before turning to my data to

analyse the interplay between the three. I will suggest that for all the emphasis on women's liberation, Dalit parties in Tamil Nadu operate within the same discourses of honour and shame as other organisations in the state which constrains the activism of Dalit women.

### **Caste Politics in Tamil Nadu**

A comprehensive summary of Tamil politics is beyond the scope of this paper<sup>2</sup>. The focus here, instead, is on two processes that have shaped and continue to shape political dynamics in the state, namely Tamil nationalism and caste politics. Tamil nationalism, as Barnett (1976: 184) highlights, primarily takes a cultural form. By this she means that the emphasis is on markers of difference rather than the search for political institutions. The defence of the Tamil language against moves to make Hindi *the* national language; the relative dominance of and deference towards 'Shudra' castes; the characterisation of India as split into north and south and the 'pre-eminence of Tamilians' are all features that are said to cut 'across caste and class lines'. The devotion to 'Mother Tamil' (Ramaswamy 1997) and the mobilisation around Tamil concerns, such as the war in Sri Lanka, continue to inform politics in the state.

Caste politics has an equally strong foundation. Mobilisation and negotiation on the basis of caste in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries instilled a belief that social and ritual hierarchies could be challenged and renegotiated through political mobilization. Although the non-Brahmin movement in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was arguably an attempt to secure a share of power and resources for non-Brahmin *elites*, it resulted in the early institution of affirmative action programmes for Backward Castes and Classes. These programmes were extended after Independence, when state governments gained the discretion to implement reservations for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), long before they were rolled out across India. The ability of caste based mobilisation to secure economic benefits, jobs, or special concessions, set a precedent that continues to inform state politics.

Post-Independence politics in Tamil Nadu has seen this pattern sustained. Congress was challenged for being too elitist and divorced from Tamil concerns and displaced by Dravidian parties that contested the perceived dominance of northern and Hindi-speaking states. Under the leadership of the radical thinker E. V. Ramaswamy – better known as Periyar (Great One) – the Dravidian movement articulated a coherent critique of caste and religion. Though the parties which emerged out of the movement claimed to represent all Tamils, they cohered around a core support base of Backward but dominant castes, and confronted by the demands of this base and the need to secure votes from all castes, they have gradually relinquished their social radicalism (Subramaniam 1999; Geetha and Rajadurai 2011). Successive challengers, therefore, mobilised around caste categories to highlight the continued exclusion of lower caste groups from the privileges of office and the resources of the state. The two main parties at the centre of the present caste conflagration in Tamil Nadu emerged at this point. In the late 1980s, the sizable Vanniyar population demonstrated forcefully to demand recognition as a *Most* Backward Caste (MBC) and proportional access to reservations. The culmination of this campaign of extra-legal mobilization was the assimilation of the PMK into mainstream political institutions (Arun 2007; Wyatt 2009).

The segmented nature of Tamil politics is to the fore here. Whilst the PMK made some efforts to reach out to, and incorporate, those at the foot of the caste hierarchy (Dalits), the emphasis was firmly upon Vanniyar interests and development rather than social justice

per se. As Barnett noted (1976: 327), Dalits are integrated into the Tamil nationalist project in a rhetorical sense as *Adi-* or ‘original’ Dravidians, but ‘Adi-Dravida caste social isolation is increasing’. Since Barnett reached those conclusions, the political emergence of Vanniyars and Thevars – castes just above Dalits in the social hierarchy – reinforced that isolation. Pandian (2000: 504) argues that Vanniyars and Thevars have stagnated in terms of educational and economic development, but are ‘armed with a heightened sense of caste pride to establish their difference and superiority ‘over the Dalits. These castes lay claim to a distinguished past and, lacking other means, use violent means to retain their dominance. Their continued marginalisation and the political assertion of intermediate castes ultimately led to the assertion of autonomous Dalit movements similarly seeking entry to political institutions. Soon after transforming itself into a political party, the VCK forged an alliance with the PMK on a Tamil nationalist platform. Given the relative class positions of party members, this union made sense and had the potential to bring lower castes to power. As Harriss (2012) observes, however, despite significant changes to caste politics and practice on the ground, ‘hierarchical values’ continue to inform people’s actions. Many people from higher castes refused to vote for a Dalit party and the PMK vote collapsed. The party, therefore, decided that its political interests were best served by a retrenchment of caste boundaries and the construction of the Dalit-based VCK as a threat to the caste order and the ‘honour’ of the Vanniyars.

### **Caste & Honour**

The salient point about these mobilisations, for the purposes of this paper, is that the political discourses and rhetoric surrounding Tamil nationalism and caste politics both hinge on the concept of honour and the related sentiments of pride and shame. Both concepts are ‘deeply tied up with sexuality and power, with masculinity and gender relations’ (Gilmore 1987: 16). Whilst codes of honour inform individual behaviour and societal roles – such as the norm that men should provide for and control his family – in the political context ‘individual honour is usually subsumed to family and religious or community honor’ (George 2006: 37) and ‘behaving honourably’ comes to mean acting in accordance with parental, caste or community norms (Chakravarti 2005). Such honour, as Gupte (2013: 73) observes, is ‘largely centred on the behaviour of women’. This understanding of ‘honour’, as Welchman and Hossain (2005: 4) observe, is ‘vested in male (family and/or conjugal) control over women and specifically women’s sexual conduct: actual, suspected or potential’. This reflects the crucial role that female chastity plays in the construction of boundaries (cf. Yuval-Davis 1997). This occurs on multiple levels: for a start the group in question tends to be conceived as female – Mother Tamil, for instance – and require defending. Secondly, Chakravarti (1993) and Chowdhry (1998) argue that the ‘purity’ of the group, in a caste context at least, depends upon endogamy and the control of female sexuality. As we have seen, however, the boundaries of endogamy and the degree to which it is policed shift over time. This reminds us that ‘honour’ is a relational concept that requires ‘others’ against whom the group is compared (Gorringe 2006). Looking at the shifting patterns of endogamy and the changing dynamics of caste violence, we can echo Abraham’s (2014: 58) conclusion that ‘the control of women’s sexuality is not so much about the “purity of caste blood” as about maintaining privilege and power, or asserting caste pride’.

According to Gupte (2013: 73), women are often disregarded ‘as members of an honour group except in terms of their chastity being enforced by male members of the family’. She argues that women embody a group’s honour whereas men ‘possess’ it. In contrast, Wikan (1984) rightly notes that women too may possess honour, but it is clear that discourses

around honourability are gendered (George 2006). Where male honour rests on their ability to control women's bodies (Welchman and Hossain 2005; Rao 2015), female honour entails abiding by appropriate and sanctioned roles and codes of conduct (Still 2011). Additionally, where men who act dishonourably on a personal level may shame themselves, women's transgressions affect the standing of their caste or community. 'Choice – or desire – as expressed by women', therefore, 'is somehow intrinsically seen as illicit' when it runs counter to parental injunctions or community norms (Chakravarti 2005: 321). Whilst Gupte (2013: 75) claims that men have honour and women shame, thus, I contend that the division is gendered rather than sexed and that shame, perhaps, is the feminine counter-part of honour in a group context. The failure by men to protect the inviolability of 'their' women, thus, leads to collective humiliation (cf. Delaney 1987; Anandhi, Jeyaranjan and Krishnan 2002). Given the significance accorded to honour in Tamil society, such shame (*veka-kedu*) reduces one's standing in society to an almost sub-human level and diminishes or feminizes the manliness of the shamed party. To dishonour the women of a group is to emasculate the men (Anandhi, Jeyaranjan and Krishnan 2002).

Caste conflicts revolve around these dynamics. Groups assert their status by seeking to humiliate or shame the 'other' whilst retaining their standing. Such processes, of course, are never inevitable. Groups, rather, are socialised into honorific modes of behaviour and mobilised into action using the emotive language of honour and shame and the sentiments of group pride and esteem (Gorringe 2006). Anandhi, Jeyaranjan and Krishnan (2002: 4399) accordingly, note how honour is tied to power and status and can shift over-time. They note the historical 'denial of masculine identity to dalit men in the non-household domain', and attest that Dalit mobilisation has created a new masculine identity based upon challenging caste dominance. Crucially, the assertion by Dalits has contributed to the 'unmaking of upper caste masculinity in the public domain' (ibid. 4404). A significant emotive driver of caste conflict, as Pandian (2000) indicates, is a heightened sense of caste *pride*: a desire to maintain face and to enhance the image of the group. In the face of mobilisation by and the gradual development of Dalits, this is mostly keenly felt by BC groups who see their privileges and social standing being threatened. 'Honour', in Pitt-Rivers' pithy phrase, 'is the clearing house for the conflicts of social structure' (1965: 73).

Pitt-Rivers (1965: 58), furthermore, observes that honour is only an issue between social equals. He opines that groups with low status must needs accept their inferiority and that those in exalted positions are secure in their superiority. 'To put it differently, a person who lacks self-respect, and does not aspire to attain it, cannot be humiliated' (Guru 2009: 10). Guru goes on to note that one's place in society is contingent, and that 'the untouchable can also resignify his body and use it as a poisoned weapon to create a sense of anxiety in his/her tormentor' (2009: 14). Dominant castes used sexual violence against Dalit women as a means of demonstrating their virility and shaming Dalit men (Geetha 2009; Irudayam, Maghubhai and Lee 2011), but they now find their dominance and masculinity subject to question by the Dalit challenge. Pandian (2000) documents the rising levels of caste violence that attend this re-negotiation of caste standing, and Anandhi, Jeyaranjan and Krishnan (2002: 4404) observe how dominant castes faced by assertive Dalits rework their masculinity through increased violence against 'their' women. Still (2011: 1143) explores the impact of such developments for Dalit women and notes how assertion by Dalit movements and economic development 'are concurrent with a new kind of sexual morality'. As the self-esteem and social standing of a caste rises, Heyer (2014) and Rao (2015) illustrate, new norms and ideals may be put in place such as domesticating women. Both authors note how giving up arduous and poorly rewarded employment may be

beneficial in many ways, but also how such trends are often accompanied by moral policing. Rogers (2008: 80) shows how Dalit men resort to a form of hyper-masculinity in response to their marginality which valorises male physical strength and control over women. Anandhi, Jeyaranjan and Krishnan (2002) point towards a rise in drinking and conspicuous consumption too, and both studies note how teasing, taunting or wooing women from higher castes is celebrated in this new identity. The changing masculinity of Dalit males, Still (2011: 1144) argues, rests on 'controlling Dalit women in the name of honour as well as attempting to dishonour upper-caste women'. These notions of honour, in other words, are not confined to moments of conflict but inform everyday interactions, attitudes and norms. It is to the complex and sometime contradictory position of Dalit women in a society structured around caste honour that we will turn after a brief discussion of research methods.

### **Methods: Questions of Honour?**

This paper is based on empirical research in Tamil Nadu conducted as part of an ESRC funded project on Dalit politics in 2012. Data was gathered over ten months of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in Madurai District, and includes over 50 formal and 50 informal interviews (all in Tamil), analysis of newspapers and other documents and observation of events and speeches. The larger project concerned the institutionalisation of Dalit political parties and questions of honour and shame were not to the fore and did not feature in interview guides. The issues were raised unprompted by respondents both in response to questions about the participation of women in Dalit politics and because the concept of 'honour' was inescapable in the febrile atmosphere of caste competition and violence as described at the head of the paper. The fact that interviewees addressed the topics of sexuality, violence and abuse posed several ethical dilemmas. The need to maintain confidentiality and anonymity was important, but it was also incumbent on me to interpret the data and the discursive uses of the concepts with great care. The women I spoke to had suffered violence and abuse, but defied norms that shame female victims (Irudayam, Mangubhai and Lee 2011) to contest both caste and patriarchy. It was, therefore, also imperative that I respond to their concerns and analysed these themes. Whilst many of these themes are sensitive ones, they were shared freely with me by respondents. Rao (2015) found that Dalit women were more freely able to discuss concerns than those from upper-castes. This may reflect Rege's (1998) argument that 'Dalit women speak differently', but it certainly points to the fact that my interviewees were political activists determined to make a point and highlight abuses of power. It was their insights that led me to interrogate the concepts of 'honour' and 'pride' as articulated in the caste context and explore how these discourses shape everyday actions in ways that constrain Dalit women's activism.

### **Demanding Honour**

Dalit women are frequently referred to as 'triply oppressed'; by caste, patriarchy and class. Dalit leaders often point to them as encapsulating the plight of the Dalit community. This argument rests, in large part, on the fact that such women are more likely to work and are, thus, less constrained by patriarchal controls. Dyson and Moore (1983) argue that lower caste women, especially in South India, have more autonomy than their upper-caste and northern counterparts. Not all labour is liberating, however, nor do women necessarily enjoy the fruits of their labour (cf. Heyer 2014). Many of my respondents spoke of how landlords would prey on Dalit women in the fields or, in some cases, insist on sleeping with Dalit brides on their wedding nights, as an assertion of their control. In her life-story, as recounted to Racine and Racine, the Paraiyar (a Dalit caste) woman Viramma speaks



matter-of-factly about sexual advances and abuse. She notes how powerless her husband was to do anything about this:

A Pariah (sic) had no rights in those days; he'd always lie flat on his stomach in front of his masters. He couldn't make any claims like now. So he'd go and get drunk and shout abuse at the entrance to the *ur* [village]. ... No one would take it seriously: they'd say it was drunkard's talk and that's all there was to it (Viramma et al. 1997: 52-3).

Racine and Racine (1998: 7) maintain that Viramma does not 'challenge the dominant values', but embedded within her account is the frustration of Dalit men and the desire for change. Elsewhere, Viramma points to political parties as offering a means of challenging these abuses of power. My respondents similarly pointed to processes of caste change, but like those in Anandhi, Jeyaranjan and Krishnan's (2002: 4400) study, they credited the emergence of Dalit parties in particular as a turning point. As one village-based female VCK activist observed:

Village women ... usually never leave the village, they remain within four walls; all they know is cooking, looking after their husband and their children – they know nothing of the outside world. Most Dalit women in particular were like that. Today, because there are leaders like me, we go and speak to them and tell them what is happening and explain that we cannot remain submissive forever. Only if we too give voice for our rights will we be able to fully gain our rights. ... For the recent demonstration [Madurai, August 2012] even, 100 [village] women ... came en masse. That is a huge thing. Dalit women coming out to a demonstration like that is a huge matter (Revathi, interview, August 2012)

The portrait offered here is of a benighted group of people empowered and enlightened by activist intervention. Significantly, Revathi credits Dalit politics rather than women's groups or movements for emboldening Dalit women. Whilst many women are involved in Self-Help Groups thanks to their promotion by the state government and women's movement have raised issues of exploitation and violence, it is primarily Dalit movements that have mobilised Dalit women. Activist and academic Gabriele Dietrich (2001: 204) notes that women's movements are often not 'seen as trustworthy since it is seen as not taking caste issues seriously'. A local VCK women's wing leader put it more forcefully:

Till now they [Dalit women] had no awareness at all. That is, since the party has emerged we have taught them awareness. I have been in the party for 25 years, but before that I too lacked awareness [*villipunnarvu*]. ... Before then how many women suffered from casteist abuses? How many doused themselves in kerosene? Dominant caste people would use the women to sate their desires; there are so many women who have been abused in this way. ... Now they have the ability to take up these issues and to protest and struggle to protect their honour. That is a huge 'achievement' [in Eng] (Deepa, Interview August 2012).

Deepa's quote here encapsulates the position of Dalit movements: Dalit women were mired in ignorance and subject to exploitation and abuse, but have now gained awareness and started to challenge caste norms. Two further points stand out here; firstly, there is the explicit reference to defending their honour at the end of the quote, emphasising both that Dalit castes now assert their honour too, *and* that women do not necessarily see themselves

as lacking honour even if it is primarily defined by males. Honour, as Still (2011: 1144) observes, 'is the most accessible way of elevating one's status', but this applies only to Dalit castes that have experienced some social development already.<sup>3</sup>

Pandiyammal, the Madurai District Secretary of the VCK went further still when she showed me a picture of a huge DMK meeting (Interview, April 2012). The, then Chief Minister, Karunanidhi is presiding surrounded by other VIPs and politicians. At the podium delivering a speech to this august company stands Pandiyammal. She noted the significance of a poorly educated Dalit woman being called on to address this gathering and emphasised the respect with which she was received. Honour, as Pitt-Rivers (1965: 21) argues, relates to a persons' 'estimation of his (sic) own worth, his *claim* to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognised by society, his *right* to pride' (emphasis in original). For Pandiyammal, her invitation to speak at the meeting was not interpreted as an individual success story, but represented a collective achievement for Dalit women.

It is in this context that the second point made in Deepa's quote above assumes greater salience. Her reference to women dousing themselves in kerosene invokes the thorny issue of domestic violence and abuse given the strong association between such immolation (self or forced) and dowry related harassment. One of the main issues that Dalit women activists encounter is domestic abuse, but this is one of the key silences in most Dalit politics (Anandhi 2013; Dietrich 2001). Even though women's liberation is one of the main demands of the VCK, the issue is not addressed systematically. A paradox of contemporary Dalit mobilisation is that it inspires women and brings them out of their homes and villages, but then fails to address the social problems that they raise. If women's movements have been seen to neglect caste, Dalit politics has frequently ignored or reinforced patriarchy (cf. Dietrich 2001). This is, arguably, where the entanglements of honour, caste and gender are most keenly felt.

### **Policing Honour?**

Whilst Pandiyammal and others point to the new-found respectability and assertion of Dalit women as a progressive outcome of the Dalit struggle, mobilisation couched in the rhetoric of caste pride and community honour rebound upon them in multiple ways. Most obviously the withdrawal into exclusive and antagonistic caste clusters results in an increase of caste violence, but it is not just at the hands of caste foes that Dalit women suffer. As Anandhi argues, changing labour relations and the emphasis on communities of honour have caused Dalit men to see themselves in 'the role of the protector—which not only means surveillance of their sisters, but an emphasis on morality, caste purity, sexual virtuosity, monogamy, arranged marriages and even dowry, all of which was unheard of in the community' (in Gopinath 2005). All respondents confirmed that there has been an increasing tendency for Dalits to adopt dowry – in which the bride's family offers goods and money to the groom – despite earlier practices of bride-wealth payments. Such moves, Deshpande (2002) observes, can decrease the autonomy of women and reinforce patriarchal tendencies. Giving up back-breaking and poorly remunerated labour and investing time in children can, as Heyer (2014) shows, prove hugely beneficial to Dalit families but such developments may be accompanied by a heightened concern about honour (Still 2011).

The trends that Anandhi speaks of were to the fore when the VCK joined hands with the PMK in the Tamil Protection Movement in launching campaigns to defend the morality

and chastity of Tamil women.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the TPM was short-lived, the emphasis on honour has been more durable and percolated down into the everyday functioning of Dalit movements at the grassroots. Anandraj, a senior VCK functionary spoke forlornly of the perception that women who enter the party abandon their husbands and are seen as promiscuous. I was somewhat puzzled by this:

H: Does it matter what they do at home so long as they do party work?

A: That's wrong isn't it? We need to look at issue of morality too don't we?

H: What have they done wrong? They get a proper divorce and then get together with someone else.

A: Not just someone else, they move from one man to the next. What sort of character is this? ... You are a foreigner so you will not understand (Interview, June 2012).

Such moral policing is primarily aimed at women and, generally speaking, absent when it comes to male misbehaviour. The women's wing of the party attempts to take up such issues, but it is constrained by the wider culture within which it operates. For instance, two women activists related a case in which a young woman whose husband went abroad for work was sexually exploited by one of his relatives. When she became pregnant both her husband and her abuser disowned her and the latter absconded to Singapore. In this predicament she approached the VCK. Clearly the party plays a key role here and serves as a resource for those with no-one else to turn to. The women activists approached the police to complain about the man and seek a resolution which involved one or other of the men being compelled to 'take her back'.

H: Does she have to live with one of these men? Can she not live independently?

D: How can she cope on her own?

T: What is she going to do with two children?

D: How will she live? One or other of them [the men] must accept them [the woman and children]. She needs to be able to show the children who their dad is doesn't she? So at least one of them needs to accept. We need to bring him [the abuser] back from Singapore and marry him off or we must punish both of them (Deepa and TamizhMurasu, interview August 2012).

The critique of male power, thus, only extends so far and – in itself – reinforces the idea of the male provider and protector. In this instance at least the activists are clear in apportioning blame to the men, but an emphasis on honour can easily lead to the woman being blamed. Take, for instance, Anandraj's assessment of a VCK women's wing leader in Madurai:

This woman goes into villages and who does she recruit? Women on the margins like widows and unmarried; the most marginalised. They are the ones who speak out most and act boldly. See, those who are weakest sexually are the boldest in terms of speech. It is those women that they are organising, but can these women mobilise the others in the village? They cannot. The other women will not put their faith in them and join in because they think: 'This woman is a bad character' and so they do not join. This is the basic problem. (Interview June 2012)

Anandraj here does not reject or despise the marginalised women himself, but he attributes such concerns to others. Crucially, he then argues that the party needs to

address this in order to reach out to others. The core constituents of the party, thus, are to be sidelined from leadership in order to improve the image of the party and recruit others. The problem is, as Puliyyamma (Interview, August 2012) and others pointed out, that female activists were inevitably cast as hussies and forward women. Still (2011) similarly points out how Dalit women who leave the confines of the village for work or education risk a spoiled reputation. This in part feeds into a tendency for a strict division of labour within activist homes. When I asked the wife of a prominent Dalit activist about the election for example her response was revealing:

No use asking me, I know nothing about politics.

H: But your husband is involved in Dalit activism.

Yes, he is the one you should ask.

H: But you vote don't you?

Yes, I go along to vote, but I just vote for whom everyone else is voting for (Fieldnotes, March 2012).

As Anandraj observed:

A: Active husbands do not educate their wives. ... Now, if a man is in the movement for instance, then he will not talk about politics to his wife. If you observe closely you'll understand.

H: No, I know, I know, I have seen that.

A: They will not speak. There will be patriarchy in the family (Interview June 2012).

His statement here sums up the contradictory position of Dalit movements towards women. Here he articulates the progressive aspects of the VCK platform: he views women as potential equals who should be educated, desires more egalitarian marriages and does not think the home should be divorced from the activist world. Unlike the men he castigates in the quote above, his own wife is a social activist. As we saw above, however, he feels that the VCK attracts the wrong type of women and needs to have more educated and professional women leaders. In part this is a reflection on the realities of Tamil society. Reflecting on the difficulties facing women leaders Deepa noted that 'when men do not respect people amongst themselves, they will certainly not have learned to respect the women' (Interview, August 2012). The VCK, furthermore, is now an established party and must follow certain political norms. When I asked one prominent women's wing leader if she would accept a more central post in the party she responded that she got more respect from women, could relate to them more directly and then pointed to her lack of education: 'If I go and get a big position then someone will come along as say 'akka, read this'. I would be shamed' (Interview, August 2012).

Party leaders, thus, are chosen not just on the basis of commitment, conviction and performance but with the requirements of social and political norms in mind. The problem with this is that the concerns of poor Dalit women are sometimes downplayed as a result because those representing them hail from a different class background or stick to the established political script. The issues of alcoholism, domestic violence, and dowry, for instance rarely feature in a clear sign that Dalit parties remain reluctant to address internal problems of patriarchy and gender discrimination. Even when Thirumavalavan adopted prohibition as a central plank of the party this was not often related to domestic violence and did not stop young men from attending party meetings in a state of inebriation. The rhetoric of caste pride, valour and one-upmanship has seen party political events become

hyper-masculine arenas in which young men jostle, push and shove their way to be near to the leader and then engage in terrifying chases – piled onto motorbikes and hanging out of vehicles to be part of the leader’s convoy (cf. Anandhi, Jeyaranjan and Krishnan 2002). In the process the public space of the political meeting becomes one that women are wary of. Not only may they be subject to harassment or molestation, but attendance at such events can mean that their reputation is called into question.

The boundary marking entailed in discourses of honour also has implications for the wider Dalit project. Inbanathan, a Christian Dalit activist, recounted his experience:

Now Ambedkar in Annihilation of Caste spoke about inter-marriage as one means of countering caste, but when I had a love marriage to a non-Dalit girl then I faced all kinds of criticism about my lack of commitment to the Dalit struggle. They would not accept my more inclusive version of ‘Dalit’. So, what is the implication? Dalit has become a caste – it is just like SC or any other terminology. Even the papers and academics started off not using it, now it is a byword for SC. Look at the Dalit politicians, they may be called Dalit leaders but they represent particular castes (Fieldnotes, February 2012).

With this we come full circle. The PMK’s attack on cross-caste marriages was rightly ridiculed and condemned by Thirumavalavan at the head of the paper, but here we see how the failure to critique discourses of honour and patriarchy within the Dalit community can occasion similar practices *amongst* Dalits themselves. Trapped between the aggression of antagonistic castes and the moral scrutiny of their own community Dalit women occasionally feel betrayed in a graphic illustration of the workings of intersectionality: as Dalits they endorse the VCK, as those lacking education they can feel excluded, and as women they may be subject to further constraints.

### **Conclusion: Questions of Honour**

Caste dynamics are clearly changing in contemporary Tamil Nadu. Actions that were once taken-for-granted have now been contested if not eradicated as Dalits have asserted themselves and increased awareness of rights. Dalit women have been to the fore in this struggle, mobilising people at the grassroots, standing firm against caste abusers and police harassment or inaction. At best the relationship between Dalit movements and women activists has been symbiotic:

We [women’s wing of the VCK] are organising the women systematically – ensuring that women who do not have the vote are registered on the electoral role; securing the various government schemes that offer Rs1000 for such women for them; securing house title deeds. ... We have protested to secure pattas [title deeds] from the collector. In like manner, whatever their needs are, we struggle to claim them from the government (Deepa, Interview, 2013).

One female leader in Madurai spoke movingly of how the urban estate in which she lived was attacked and ransacked by a casteist mob twenty years ago. Driven from her hiding place by fire she was caught and abused by the mob and contemplated suicide. At that point, she said, ‘our leader came and took my hand and raised me up’. Without the spirit and courage generated by the Dalit movements of the 1980s, caste discrimination would be even more widespread and commonplace than it is. Today, as Deepa noted above, Dalit women can fight back and protect their ‘honour’. She correctly notes what a huge

achievement this is, but is also aware of the long road ahead for Dalit women. That road, paradoxically, is made harder to traverse by the adoption of discourses of honour and pride which can legitimise violence against women (cf. Chakravarti 2005).

The VCK are not static or inflexible and have shown their willingness to change over time; recently seeking to dramatically increase the number of women leaders for instance<sup>5</sup>. It is, therefore, in the spirit of constructive critique and out of a sense of responsibility towards women activists within the party that these reflections are offered. Although Deepa and others take great heart from the rise of the VCK and the standing of their leader, it is important to note that one of the main obstacles standing between Dalit women and a more egalitarian society, is precisely this emotive appeal to caste honour, pride and shame. Taken together these discourses act to control and constrain women's agency in multiple ways. The emphasis on group honour entails the moral policing of women and hinders attempts to confront Dalit patriarchy. The stress on caste pride entails some emulation of higher status groups in terms of the adoption of practices like dowry or withdrawing women from work whilst subjecting them to masculine authority and surveillance (Anandhi, Jeyaranjan and Krishnan 2002). The fear of collective shame serves to regulate the conduct and free movement of women and casts certain women as undesirable or unworthy leaders. In the process there is a danger that the strengths of the Dalit movement – the goal of women's liberation, the campaigns against casteist abuse, the empowerment and social education of Dalit women – will be diluted. In a bid to abide by hegemonic codes of conduct there is also a risk of greater differentiation along class and caste lines as seen in the marginalisation of uneducated women and incidents involving intra-Dalit honour crimes (Chandran 2012). Since 2012, the VCK have campaigned vociferously against so-called 'honour crimes' and sought to reach out to like-minded groups and parties to forge a coalition united against casteism. Rather than constructing notions of honour around the chastity of women (and policing them accordingly), or mobilising caste groups by reference to the abuse or neglect of 'their womenfolk', Dalit politics could then recognise and begin to challenge the central role of 'honour' in maintaining caste power and privilege.

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<sup>1</sup> For details on the violence see the *International Dalit Solidarity Network* page on this: <http://idsn.org/news-resources/idsn-news/read/article/mob-burns-hundreds-of-dalit-homes/128/> Also see Gorringe 2013.

<sup>2</sup> On contemporary Tamil politics see Subramanian (1999) and Wyatt (2009). For a summary of caste and politics in the state see Gorringe (2012).

<sup>3</sup> In Tamil Nadu, there are three main Dalit castes. The Pallars are the most developed in material terms and this is seen in the rejection by some activists of their Dalit status. Paraiyars, who form the bulk of VCK members, are not so developed as Pallars but have done better educationally and economically than Arunthathiyars who are the least developed of the three and only starting to mobilise politically.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this issue see Anandhi (2005).

<sup>5</sup> Whilst the reciprocity on which much feminist and activist research is premised (Smeltzer 2012; Gillan and Pickerill 2012) is difficult across continents, it is facilitated somewhat by communications technology. One senior female activist who I met up with in 2012, thus, credited my work for her promotion. Whilst her organisational ability and commitment were clearly key to her advancement, what her account did was highlight how research can circulate and feed into local discussions and decisions. We cannot, therefore, assume that academic work has no impact and must take the ethical responsibilities of representation seriously.

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